

“How Can I Keep from Singing: Hope
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Text: Psalm 46
Myers Park Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 46

- ¹ *God is our refuge and strength,
a very present* help in trouble.*
- ² *Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;*
- ³ *though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*
- ⁴ *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.*
- ⁵ *God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.*
- ⁶ *The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.*
- ⁷ *The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*
- ⁸ *Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.*
- ⁹ *He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.*
- ¹⁰ *‘Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.’*
- ¹¹ *The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

Earth changing, mountains shaking and trembling, waters roaring and foaming, nations in an uproar, kingdoms tottering; such is the world of the Psalmist some 2,700 years ago. It’s not hard to imagine in our day and age. Our world is literally melting. A heat-wave last summer brought 80 degree temperatures to the arctic, melting an estimated 40 billion tons of Greenland’s ice sheet.¹ Wildfires are consuming California at unprecedented rates. Extreme weather has become the norm. Since 2010, the United States has experienced 19 events categorized as 1,000 year floods. Waters are roaring and foaming.²

¹ Cited here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/opinion/sunday/science-climate-change.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

² From statistics cited in these two articles: <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/8/28/16211392/100-500-year-flood-meaning> and <https://weather.com/safety/floods/news/2018-09-27-1000-year-rainfall-events-lower-48>

So are politicians. Our political discourse these days sounds more like bullies on a playground in middle school than thoughtful debate and reasoned response. On the global stage, things are no better. The rising tide of nationalism across the world has nations in an uproar and kingdoms tottering. It's not hard to understand the cultural climate of Psalm 46. Their world is our world. Perhaps that is the nature of this world.

In the world of Family Systems Theory, there is a concept called "chronic anxiety." As opposed to acute anxiety brought about by some unique event—like a cancer diagnosis, or a job loss, or a phase of adolescent development, chronic anxiety is an ongoing state of being that defines the nature of a system, be it a family, a business, or a nation.³ Chronically anxious systems have five characteristics. The first is **reactivity** defined by knee-jerk reactions that "seem to bypass the cerebral cortex and perpetuate a super-charged emotional atmosphere." The second symptom of chronic anxiety is **herding**; when "forces of togetherness triumph over the forces of individuality and move everyone to adapt to the least mature members." The third symptom is **blame displacement** defined by a "focus on forces that have victimized rather than take responsibility for one's own being and destiny." Scape-goating is a product of blame displacement. The fourth symptom is a **quick-fix mentality** that seeks relief of symptoms over fundamental change. Finally, chronically anxious systems lack good leadership, "a failure of nerve," as Friedman puts it, "that both stems from and contributes to reactivity, herding, blame displacement and a quick fix mentality."

Friedman's work was prophetic. He wrote about chronic anxiety in systems over twenty years ago. Could he have imagined what we see today? Could he have imagined the herding of our society as we continue to divide into like-minded tribes with our own media, our own churches, our own news to reinforce our own understandings of the world? Could he have imagined the way scape-goating would devolve into demonization and demagoguery? Could he have imagined the hyper-reactivity of our culture incessantly fueled by social media? Chronic anxiety impacts our families, our churches, our communities, our nation and our world. It's everywhere.

What is the psalmist's counsel regarding life in the midst of chronic anxiety? The Psalmist calls for a reorientation away from the anxiety and toward God. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear ... the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." Within the psalm we hear the counsel of the Lord: "Be still, and know that I am God." In the face of tottering kingdoms and roaring nations and trembling mountains and foaming seas, God calls us to be still and know God is God. What an other-worldly word in the midst of our world of frantic activity. In a world driven by media madness, is it even possible to be still? More importantly, is it the right thing to do? Remember two weeks ago? Moses told the people to be still, but God called them to go forward.

Can we just be still in the face of the climate changes we are witnessing? What about the current political climate? No matter what your convictions are about where things are heading in our nation, is it faithful to be still right now? What does God mean, "Be still and know"? What about in our own lives when mountains are trembling and waters are roaring, and pressures are mounting and emotions are foaming? How are we to be still?

³ For more on this see Edwin Friedman's, *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*

First of all, Psalm 46 is not the only word we have from the Lord regarding who we are called to be and what we are called to do, or not do. Within Scripture there are plenty of calls to action. But in the midst of our world of frantic activity, perhaps Psalm 46 offers a corrective to our chronically anxious reactivity. Perhaps the psalmist offers a step 1 in our world of chronic anxiety. In the face of tottering kingdoms and roaring nations and trembling mountains and foaming seas, be they in our climate or in our Congress, or in our community, or in the unseen tension between two people who are supposed to love one another, perhaps step 1 is be still. Be still and know that God is God. God has been God and God will be God with or without our help or our action or our inaction, for that matter! When we take a moment to be still and know this God, we know that God is with us. In God's presence we find refuge. In God's presence we find strength. In God's presence we find courage not to fear, "though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea."

In the face of anxiety, too often we react rather than respond. We can operate with a fire-ready-aim mentality driven more by adrenaline than by thought. When we are met by a threatening stimulus, adrenaline fires in our brains, shooting messages from the inner brain to the large muscles of our bodies to equip our fight or flight instincts. Adrenaline prevents the cerebral cortex from functioning. We're not supposed to analyze information when a sabre tooth tiger pops up in front of us. However, we are supposed to be able to think in the face of crisis. Remember what our grandmothers taught us to do when we got angry? At least mine did. Count to ten. Do you know how long it takes our brains to absorb adrenaline? About ten seconds. If we can be still for ten seconds, adrenaline levels will moderate, and we will be capable of thinking. I wonder how long it takes society to absorb communal adrenaline? No doubt longer than the media cycle allows. In a world of chronic anxiety, perhaps step 1 is to be still and know that God is God.

Being still also reminds us we are not God. This is as important as remembering God is God. Too often we human beings want to play God. In fact, that's the original sin of Genesis 3. It was the motivation for tasting the forbidden fruit; to be like God, knowing good and evil. But we are not God. We can only be who God has created us to be; human beings reflecting God's image, created in love for love, to love God and one another. That's it.

To be still and know that God is God and we are not is to connect with the One Paul Tillich described as "the ground of being." To find our foundation in the God who is the ground of being fosters courage in the face of anxiety. We call such courage, "Faith." Tillich called faith "the courage to be." He wrote: "The courage to be is an ethical act in which we affirm our own being in spite of those elements of our existence that conflict with our being ... This courage must be rooted in a power of being that is greater than oneself or the power of one's world."

Yesterday we hosted a Leadership Workshop here at the church for leaders from the fifteen congregations of the pastors who make up our Macedonian Ministry Cohort. We had folks from Methodist, Presbyterian, AME, and Baptist churches. All of us are dealing with the challenges related to the changes in our culture impacting institutional religion, and the chronic anxiety it breeds. And all of us agreed that the church needs to shift from focusing down and in to up and out, to proclaiming and embodying the gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ out there in the world.

We talked about the power of story, particularly the power of the gospel story to change our lives, our church's and our world. Then we asked each other, "What stories are shaping your community? Are they true? What are the consequences?" We took time around tables to share with one another stories that shape our congregations and our own lives. I thought of the stories I've heard about our congregation. Those that came to mind were all success stories, stories about our courage, our capabilities, our capacity to make a difference in the world.

These stories reflect the conviction that this congregation has a lot of amazing people in it, smart people, creative people, gifted people, people with power and influence and ingenuity, people who can flat out get stuff done. That's true. But success stories are not our only stories. We've had our failures. We've had our struggles. Powerful as we are, we are not God. And any true success we've achieved is a product of God's grace, not our own works.

God is God. In the midst of a changing planet and trembling mountains and roaring waters and tottering kingdoms, in the midst of the crises we face in our individual lives and relationships, our refuge and strength is not found in our intellect, nor our wealth, nor our social capital, nor any of the other false gods of our culture. Our refuge and strength is God. God is a very present help in trouble. The Lord of hosts is with us! The God of Jacob is our refuge. God is God, we are not. And God is able. This is the reorientation called for by Psalm 46.

In recognizing this truth, we offer ourselves to God; our intellect, our wealth, our social capital, all the gifts God has entrusted to us. We offer our lives to God, to serve God's work in the world, not our own agendas and our own insatiable desires. We live not for ourselves; we live for God. We commit ourselves to God's agenda for the transformation of creation into the beloved community, where wars cease and bows are broken and spears are shattered and we study war no more, where the image of God in every human being is honored, and even enemies are loved, where the poor are blessed and those who mourn are comforted and the humble inherit the earth. This is the reorientation that defines the life of faith

In our chronically anxious world, hear the word of the Lord. Be still and know that I am God...Be still and know ... Be still ... Be. Amen.